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ABSTRACT

The flow of messages in the information age is no longer predominately down a chain of command but increasingly lateral. The modern communications process is also task specific, faster paced, more graphic and less verbal, and more technologically directed. These changes have rendered our definitions of communication skills and our school curriculum obsolete. Among the skills neglected in typical curricula are message compression, decoding and interpreting condensed messages, kinesics, synthesizing information, visual literacy, and rapid analysis and evaluation of message validity. To include these skills in the school curriculum we should (1) concentrate on transitional skills, (2) adopt a more holistic teaching approach, (3) identify genuinely needed as opposed to social grace communication skills, (4) increase opportunities for lateral communication, and (5) develop the concept of the "communication wardrobe," appropriate skills for different situations. For instance, skimming and listening for saliency, reading a text as an outline, compressing common words, and word games using these techniques can help develop the basic skill of message compression--getting the maximum amount of quality information in the shortest time. (JL)

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TEACHING BASIC COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS FOR AN INFORMATION SOCIETY

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The year is 1779. The Bon Homme Richard is locked in deadly naval combat with the Serapis. Amidst the roar of shot and musket John Paul Jones strides proudly to the foredeck and shouts to the British in stentorian tones, "We have not yet begun to fight." Amidships, blackened and bloody, a Yankee seaman looks up quizzically from his smoking cannon and mumbles to his mate, "There's always some character who doesn't get the word."

Two hundred years later, as the inexorable transformation of America into an information society becomes increasingly rapid, it is apparent that, as far as teaching basic communications skills is concerned, this nation's schools have not yet got the word. In classrooms all over the country under the banner of "getting back to basics" students are marking time or marching backwards while the world races on. Well meaning and dedicated teachers

continue to drill their charges in formal grammar and the niceties of linguistic ettiquette, and beleagured administrators struggle to convince Rudolph Flesch that Johnny can read and demonstrate to Edwin Newman that their students can, indeed, tell and adjective from an adverb.

Certainly, the achievement of basic literacy is essential, and mastery of the mechanics of expression is a commendable goal. My complaint is that, almost two decades after McLuhan, the atavistic rush "back to basics" has largely overlooked the changes in the nature and purposes of communications in an information society and has neglected almost entirely what cognitive science has recently told us about the ways humans communicate. Placed in charge of our space program, the architects of the back to basics movement would, no doubt, be currently gathered at Cape Canav-

eral busily supervising the construction of a mile high slingshot.

It is not enough to say, "everyone must learn to write." That is merely a truism that begs the question. The real issues lie much farther down the abstration ladder: write what? when? under what circumstances? for what audience? etc., etc. Just as writing meant one thing before the printing press and something much different afterward, so communications in the 1980's means something very different than it did in the 1950's. Yet the methods and materials used in teaching communications skills continue to be rooted in the demands and values of a fast-fading industrial era.

For example, the communications demands of the industrial age were largely vertical. Messages flowed up and down (mostly down) a relatively small and tight chain of command, reaching the factory floor in the form of directives, quotas, etc.

Industrial workers had little need for communication with each other on the job. Lateral communication was a function of management, and the higher up the ladder one went, the more important it became. Likewise, in society at large the communications thrust was downward, from the literate to the illiterate, the knowlegable to the ignorant, the powerful to the weak, and so on.

The information society, on the other hand, has a much greater demand for lateral communication. As more and more workers move from production into services, particularly information services, the need for communication among them increases enormously. Indeed, in a great many of these services, lateral communication <u>is</u> the job. This is not to suggest that vertical communication has or will disappear, any more than it is to suggest that industrial production has or will disappear. Hierarchies are still very much with us. However,

with more than half of the American work force currently engaged in the production, processing, storage, retrieval, and distribution of information, it is apparent that the flow of messages is no longer predominantly down a chain of command, but increasingly lateral. eople on the job and throughout the society at large have an expanding need to communicate.

Evidence of this shift is all around us. TV news is no longer "delivered" by a single newscaster. "Uncle Walter" Cronkite was the last in a line extending back to nineteenth century patriarchs who read the daily newspaper to their families each evening. Today we have news teams that "discuss" the day's events, with us and with each other. A prominent concern of business leaders is the problem of conflict resolution--how to keep peace in the company family. Not surprisingly, as more workers communicate laterally, we have more

disagreements, misunderstandings, and conflict. Throughout the society, at all levels, language has become more informal, even casual, a sign of the egalitarianism that is characteristic of lateral communication, as contrasted with the formality typical of vertical communication.

In addition to this lateral/vertical shift, there are numerous other changes in the communications process resulting from the movement from an industrial to an information society, far too many to detail here. To cite just a few of the more obvious:

--Industrial age information tends to be task specific. "How many widgets did we make in September? How many did we sell in Seattle?" Information age information tends to become organic, to take on a life of its own. "What do these data tell us about the place of widgets in the economy? Where do the figures tell us we should go from here?" Indus-

trial age communications, therefore, tend to be primarily factual reports while information age communications contain, and require, more inferences and judgments.

--Information age communications are much faster paced. Not only has transmittal time been reduced, but so has message length and time for development of the message. We want our information fast; brief, and immediate.

--Information age communications are more graphic and less verbal. We are relying more and more on charts, graphs, and pictures to say what we mean.

-- Information age communications are more technologically directed. Increasingly, the capability of the equipment--computers, word processors, video discs, etc. --influence the nature of the communications, sometimes limiting message length or type, requiring specialized vocabulary, or preferring visual messages to verbal.

--Information age writing tends to

be transcribed speech rather than composed prose. Not only are more and more messages dictated, but even prose composed with pencil and paper has become more colloquial, mirroring speech patterns rather than traditional writing conventions.

If these were the only changes facing us (and they represent the merest suggestion of the full range), they would dictate an immediate re-examinationof our definition of basic communication skills and a hard look at our school curriculum. When we include the kinds of communications changes likely to result from widespread use of two-way interactive TV, voice actuated/voice responding devices, more elaborate home information/entertainment centers, expanding information utilities and networks, and the shift of work from office to home, to mention just a few impending developments, our current definitions of what constitutes basic communications skills become almost terrify-

ingly limited.

Again, it is not what our present school curriculum includes that is so disturbing (after all, who can get really angry at the semicolon), but what it omits. If one were to try to deduce the communications practices of our society from what is taught in schools, one would have to conclude that people spend most of their time writing exposition, reading textbooks, and speaking and listening only on rare occasions. The existence of the electronic media, including television, could easily go undetected.

Given this state of affairs, what are some of the other communications skills that are currently neglected? Once more, the following list does not pretend to be complete, merely indicative.

--Message compression. As the pace of communications continues to quicken and transmission time becomes more expensive, it will become ever more imperative to make

every word (more accurately every symbol) count. (See accompanying teaching activities.)

--Decoding and interpreting condensed messages. Schema theory is making us aware of how much the reading process depends upon inferences supplied by the reader. As messages become more abbreviated and condensed, this skill will become even more important.

---Kinesics (or interpretation of body language). Already an important skill and likely to become even more important as video pictures begin to accompany electronic communications. It is quite likely that relatively formal systems of manual and facial gestures will be developed in order to cram as much information as possible into a given transmission (a practice already long established in certain Southern European cultures).

--Synthesizing information. As it becomes increasingly possible to call up instantly a wide array of

related information from a variety of sources and in a variety of forms, it will be necessary to be able to pull these various messages together into a new, informative whole.

-- Visual literacy. The skill of "reading" pictures, still or moving, is already a necessary (and long neglected) aspect of modern communications. Undoubtedly this skill (or, more accurately, these skills) will become even more vital in the years ahead.

-- Rapid analysis and evaluation of message validity. We are already bombarded witha constant barrage of persuasive communications: economic, political, religious, etc. With the introduction of two-way interactive video (such as the QUBE system) requiring instant viewer response, as for example, in a national referendum, it will be imperative for the ordinary citizen to be able to distinguish substance from semblence. Indeed, this may already be the most

the most vital communications skill in our society.

Obviously, these skills and all the others necessary to function effectively in an information society will be learned. The question is whether they will be integrated into the school curriculum and recognized as essential for everyone or, as at present, left to business and industry to teach, largely by way of consultants like me.

Getting these skills included in the school curriculum is in large measure a matter of changing deep-rooted institutional attitudes and values, never an easy task, and one made more difficult in this instance by the almost religious fervor of the back to basics movement. There are, however, some relatively simple steps with which to begin the process.

1. Concentrate on transitional skills. Transitional skills are valuable (and valued) in both the industrial and information soci eties.

Therefore, they are less likely to be regarded as radical departures from the standard curriculum. The accompanying teaching activities provide specific examples of how one might appraoch the teaching of one of these skills, dealing with condensed messages. This approach could be incorporated into any of several traditional subject areas.

2. Adopt a more holistic approach to communications and communications skills. Traditionally, we have concentrated on verbal communications and divided these skills into four categories: reading, writing, speaking, and listening (and then virtually ignored the latter two categories). By broadening our view beyond the traditional and classifying skills as either "transmitting" or"receiving," we obtain both a more accurate model a and a more effective appraoch. For example, we traditionally tie the process of composition to the act of writing. Writing courses

are frequently called composition courses, and school written work "compositions." A holistic view would recognize that the act of composition, a transmitting skill, is hardly specific to writing. Photographs, paintings, films, music are all composed. With very little modification of the standard curriculum we could begin to teach the skill of sequencing (time-ordering the components of a communication) through a variety of media.

3. Identify skills that are genuinely basic to the communications process and distinguish them from those that are essentially social graces. At the risk of commiting academic herasy, I submit that most spelling errors do not interfear with communication, nor does errors in agreement. In fact, both these kinds of errors will soon be routinely filtered out by word processors. I do not mean to suggest that, as matters of linguistic ettiquette, these errors are socially unimportant, merely that they are no more "basic" to

communication than table manners are to nutrition.) On the other hand, distinguishing the main idea from subordinate detail (saliency), currently taught primarily as a reading skill, is basic. If one does not get the main point, one does not get the message. By clarifying these distinctions we can better arrange our teaching priorities and more honestly identify our purposes.

4. Increase opportuinty for lateral communication. Most school communication is vertical, from teacher to student, and occasionally from student to teacher. There is a little opportunity for, or instruction in, lateral (student to student) communication. This is currently left to chance.

5. Develop the concept of "communication wardrobe". Just as no single set of clothing is appropriate for all occasions, neither is one set of communications skills. By concentrating on the limited

range of communications currently taught in the schools: reading textbooks and anthologies, writing formal (vertical) essays, answering questions, etc., we force students to acquire the rest of their wardrobes where and when they can.

By way of illustration, let us consider in more detail the teaching of a single basic skill -- compressing messages. As noted earlier, this skill will become increasingly valuable as the ever-increasing accumulation of information presses against the limits of message transmittal time.

Rationale

There are two ways to deal with an overload of available information and a scarcity of time. One is to go for speed. Where information is less important than barrage (or massage)--as, for example, in advertising, sportscasting, political stumping, overviewing--speed will be made possible by trained speakers, speech synthesizers and speech-compressing devices. Speed will be made intelligible through training in speed listening which could increase listening/comprehension ability from standard speech speed of approximately 150 words per minute to actual brain processing ability of up to 400 wpm.

The other way to deal with the info-rich/time-poor situations which will increasingly be the norm is to go for quality, learning to compress messages orally or in print, and to distill essential information from messages received.

In cognitive and classical education, emphasis long has been placed

on brevity, clarity and precision. These skills have been viewed primarily as attributes of professional essayists, journalists, scholars, editors. Gifts of the high brow. They are fast becoming the marketable assets of the successful participant in the information age...houseparent, business person, educator, professional, bill payer, student.

When speed is wanted, how do you also go for quality?

Squeeze Play: Extracting the Essense From Communication

Input:

Much electronic software produces messages in condensed form--efficient, lean, carefully sequenced and composed information generated for a particular purpose and audience. The get at the essense of these communications it is necessary only to learn to "read" or "hear" the particular shorthand dialect of the equipment or program. However, people-mated electronic equipment and people themselves do not generally pro-

duce shorthand messages. The salient information must be extracted--distilled out--by the receiver.

To distill messages with quality information in mind is to focus on the essential information in them. In articles or reports, stacks of mail or texts, teledebates or video-shopping catalogs, lectures or printouts, the key to distillation is the time-honored key to cogent journalism. Look for/ listen for the words that tell who, what, when, where, and how. As need and purpose dictate, look/listen for information that tells how much/many or why. Skip all non-essential words--articles, connectives and transitionals, descriptives and unnecessary verbs.

This is not a new skill. It is now, however, a vital skill not only for wordsmiths but for every citizen of the information age.

Activities for Distilling Messages

All In Good Time. Select three passages of similar length and style containing the sorts of information

you regularly read for (eg, professional reports, texts, journals or newspapers). Read the first passage word for word. Time yourself._____

Skim the second passage, looking only for salient words (who, what, when, where, how). Time_____

Read the third passage like a hatchet-wielding editor. Extract the salient information. Copy this onto another page. Read the passage as you have distilled it. Time_____

What do the times show?

Daily practice in skimming for saliency over a period of several weeks will make the process more natural and efficient.

Short Stops. Outlines and lists are common forms of shortened or highly distilled information. They are bits of vertical information which can be read and digested rapidly from top to bottom. Treat one of the three passages you selected as if it were a list or outline. Skim the horizontal text imagining a ver-

tical image of the essential information. (You may need to write down the list or outline a few times to train your imagination.) Stop yourself short if you begin to read every word.

Listen up. TV or radio newscasts are distilled information about events and people. TV or radio "magazines" are full-length, detailed communications about events and people. The differences between them illustrate the differences between standard and distilled messages.

Watch or listen to an evening newscast. Using a tick list, grocery store punch-counter or a calculator, count the essential words in one or two items of the newscast.

Watch or listen to a broadcast "magazine". Using the same method, count the really essential words of information.

What approximate percentage of non-essential information, salient information was there in each?

Practice listening for saliency.

Pressed for Time: Compressing Communications

Input:

To compress messages is to transmit oral-visual info. that allows max. amt. of clear commun. to occur in min. amt. of time. Compressed commun., like all qlty. commun., must meet 1 of 2 reqs.: Must be in itself clear to most aud. (eg, a nat'l. lang$.); or Must be agreed on by communicaters (eg, jargon, slang).

Kinds of existing compressed communications from which techs. may be borrowed:

Cutouts. Casual speakers (and the British) often collapse words and phrases by removing waste sounds --cutting out sections of words-- and running the remainder together. "Whadja get?" "Howdja do?" "Idunno." "Hamneggs" Worcestershire=woosta-sheer.

Such verbal cutouts can be created out of common phrases used in communication between people who

agree to or can recognize the cut-out. Cutouts can be used in distilled written communication by the employment of apostrophes or phonetic spellings.

Twords. Popular journalism has made much use of blended and hypenated or slashed joinings of two or more words. Twords conserve space (money, in the case of hired transmission time) and brain time by juxtaposing (thus marrying) two word-thoughts into one. Familiar twords are Newspeak, Medicaid, Korea-gate, media-hype, teenager, smog, gasahol.

Wordlets. Since mergers have made conglomerates out of solo businesses and service society has spawned more institutions and organizations than people to join them, words created from the innitial letters of several words (eg, PAC, VIP, GOP, mpg, ITT, UNESCO, USC, LED, LSI) have been popular ways of shorthanding long name groupings. Acronymming (ZIP Code, SALT, ERA, IRA, SWAT) is another technique which may be

used to compress messages.

Initials, while they do not conserve word-space on the line, do make reading and digesting messages easier and faster when they are well-known or obvious (eg, oz, lbs, ft, synk, revs).

Newlang. The human/machine interface, the increasingly popular use of electronic equipment and the proliferation of subcultures and special interest groups have brought about a rash of new languages, symbol systems and grammars, each suited to the style and requirements of the technology involved and the communications wardrobes of the users.

Computer "chatter" and vocabulary, CB-ese, and jive are examples of the use of code words or symbols in newlangs. Schema theory suggests that inference and personality both enhance and impede quality communication. Newlangs--that is, code words or agreed-upon symbols (eg, graphics, numbers, sounds)--have the effect of enhancing message interchanges be-

cause they leave less to be inferred by message receivers.

Activities for Compressing Messages

Word Embargo. You have been allotted Words-Per-Gallon coupons in each of three coupon booklets as part of a Federally mandated word rationing. Each coupon is worth 1 gallon. You get 10 wpg. In the first booklet you receive 10 coupons (worth 100 words). In the second, 7 coupons. In the third, 5 coupons.

You must arrive at an accurate description of yourself or of your job/work using the first booklet. Repeat using the second booklet of coupons. Then the third.

Use as many of the compression techniques as possible to stay within your word ration.

Briefings. Choose a communications mode in which you regularly participate (eg,interoffice memos, business meetings, club or association meetings, social gatherings, grocery lists). What techniques are already employed to compress messages?

Choose from the suggested techniques--cutouts, twords, wordlets, newlangs--and devise a faster, shorter more compressed way of communicating in your chosen mode. Prepare a sample. Try it.

Verbal Golf. To be played with a partner and a pro. The partners choose an object to be described to the pro. Each player in turns writes a single descriptive clue on a slip of paper and hands it to the pro. The player who uses the fewest wordstrokes to enable the pro to guess correctly what the object is wins the match. Play several times to establish par.

There is no reason that the emerging information society should communicate only in some form of mind-deadening Orwellian Newspeak. But only by broadening our perspective and including in the education of the young the full range of communications skills they will need to function in that society can we hope to foster a balanced development of the traditional skills along with the new.